

Interactive Communicative Teaching and the Young Indian Learner

Enseñanza comunicativa e interactiva y el joven estudiante de la India

Deepti Gupta*

Panjab University
deptipu@eth.net

In classrooms where English is not the mother tongue and where age-old teaching methodology rules the roost, it is not easy to make changes, especially radical ones. This case study shows how these reforms can be self-defeating if they are imposed without an attempt at a gradual, gentle and well thought out implementation. This is a slightly modified and revised version of a paper presented at the "Language in the Mind" International conference organized by the Singapore University, Singapore in September 2000.

Key words: Communicative, Task-based, Interactive, Learner-centered, Structural, Lecture-based, Pedagogy

En las clases en las que el inglés no es la lengua materna y en las que predomina una metodología anticuada de enseñanza, no es fácil efectuar cambios, especialmente cambios radicales. Este caso demuestra cómo estas reformas pueden fracasar si se las impone repentinamente sin una implementación gradual y bien planificada. Esta es una versión modificada y revisada de un documento presentado en la conferencia internacional "Idioma en la mente" organizada por la Universidad de Singapore en Singapore en septiembre de 2000.

Palabras claves: Enseñanza-Lenguas Extranjeras, Enfoque Comunicativo, Enfoque basado en Tareas, Enfoque Interactivo, Enfoque centrado en el Estudiante, Enfoque Estructural

* **Deepti Gupta** is one of the first Indian C.A. teachers, setting up the first undergraduate language laboratory in Chandigarh. An M.Phil: in stylistics and a PhD in ELT, interests are methodology, classroom observation and action research. With 19 years of teaching experience, she teaches postgraduates and supervises research.

INTRODUCTION

The development of English language teaching methods bears close resemblance to a cone, as shown in figure 1. The apex of the cone begins with the Reform Movement when applied linguists and teachers worked together to give a scientific orientation to ELT in the 1880's. Communicative language teaching, language -literature integration

and interactive teaching form the broad end of the cone. Emphasis on the individual led to the widening of the cone, a widening that continues to be evident in classrooms everywhere. The learner became the pervasive factor in language teaching. With the advent of communicative language teaching and interactive teaching came an awareness of new modes of teaching.

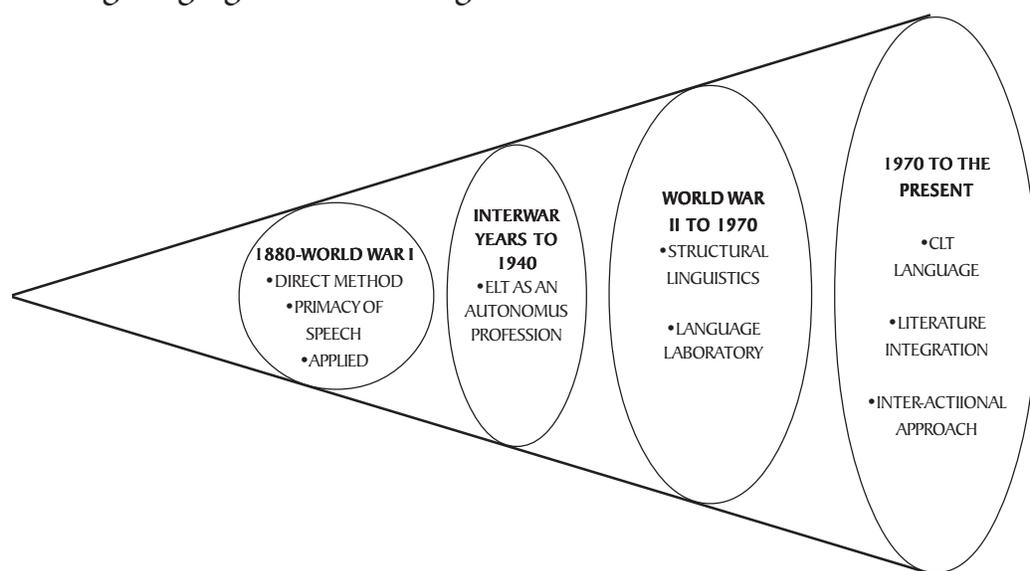


Figure 1. The ELT Cone

Colleges in North India, in Chandigarh and Punjab were quick to pick up the change and introduced two new courses at the bachelor degree level –English as communication and functional English. Although much still needs to be worked out in terms of the perfect implementation of communicative and interactive teaching, it can be said with a reasonable degree of confidence that changes in ELT pedagogy and methodology are around the corner. Five signposts of these changes were identified in an earlier study (Gupta, 1993).

1. Reduction in chalk-talk routines.
2. More active participation by learners in classroom interaction.
3. Better acceptance of new teaching techniques by teachers.
4. Increased frequency of inter-active tasks in the classroom.
5. Improvement in fluency levels of college students.

Changes in teaching pedagogy found their way to the schools too. In the 1990's schools in Chandigarh, the city of my birth,

went through a process of introspection with a special focus on their teaching methods. There were workshops on 'learner-centered teaching', seminars on 'task-based teaching' and discussions on 'teaching without the traditional textbooks'. An over-riding concern was the heavy school bag. The development that is of interest here was a questioning of old teaching methods. After these sessions came a virtual blitzkrieg on school teaching.

School boards prepared English textbooks that were communicative-task based. Schools prescribed these. In some schools, English came to be taught through worksheets and assignments. By 1992, most schools had introduced changes in their teaching methods and teachers could look forward to better-equipped students at the master's level. The first batch of students taught under the new methods reached the master's level in 1998. As a teacher, one had high expectations of this group. They had only been thirteen-years-old in Class VIII, when the changes had been introduced in schools. They had also taken functional English in college. Functional English in the Indian context is an English course designed as per the communicative approach.

METHODOLOGY

Surprisingly, these learners had not reached the level of communicative competence expected. Through classroom observation, a set of tendencies emerged in these learners, namely:

1. Heavy dependence on guidebooks and reference books to tackle literary texts.

2. Use of minimal language to achieve the bare minimum of communication. Paul Seedhouse¹ calls this tendency indexical interaction i.e. context bound, inexplicit interaction.

3. Constant repetition of utterances like *you know, I mean, as to say and so on*, as fillers.

4. Low level of enthusiasm for reading literary texts outside the curriculum.

5. Avoidance of long, written assignments that demand a good command of language and a well-developed critical faculty.

By no means do learners display these tendencies for the first time, but this situation was unique because here was a batch of learners who came from schools where task-based teaching is the norm, where communicative methods have replaced the traditional chalk-talk methods and the textbooks provided have been prepared by ELT experts well-versed in the latest currents of change.

To get to the crux of the matter, in the summer vacation of 1999, this author got together a group of 20 learners from 13 to 15 years old. They were from 10 schools in Chandigarh. Over a period of five weeks, there was interaction with them, inspection of their school textbooks and elicitation of

¹ Seedhouse writes: "What we also find in task-based interaction is a tendency to produce very indexical interaction, i.e. interaction that is context-bound, inexplicit, and hence obscure to anybody reading the extracts without knowledge of the task in which the participants were engaged. Interactants in a task seem to produce utterances at the lowest level of explicitness necessary to the successful completion of the task... L2 teachers who are reading the tasks tend to find the actual language produced in task-based interaction to be impoverished and esoteric" (1999: 153).

information from them. This exercise revealed that their schools had worked hard in the following areas:

1. **Generation of ELT Materials:**

Teachers regularly planned interactive tasks for their classrooms. Well-stocked school libraries with seminal works in ELT and the latest pedagogy were at the teachers' disposal. Worksheets were also generated for classroom use on a regular basis.

2. **Teaching Methods:**

ELT experts conducted workshops and orientation programmes regularly to update the teachers' methodology.

3. **Mode of Examination:**

Schools cut down on long-winded occasional examinations and introduced shorter, more frequent examinations.

4. **Method of Evaluation:**

Through constant discussion and exchange of ideas, teachers were encouraged to change fixed notions about good and bad answers.

5. **Introduction of Diagnostic Strategies and Error Analysis:**

Teachers decided to keep track of learner errors by maintaining records for individual learners and going through them regularly. This made the rectification of learner errors easier.

All this information was collected after visits to the 10 schools and conversations with principals and teachers. The situation seemed an ideal learning situation. If the

scenario continued, one could imagine the production of perfect language learners after some years. But this did not tally with the learners who came to this author at the master's level. They were also the products of the same system and represented a wide spectrum of learners. By now, it was clear that the situation demanded a closer analysis.

Provisionally, St. John's High School, a boys' school of Chandigarh, organized an orientation programme on learner-centered education in December, 1999. The special interest of the programme was ELT. As a part of the exercise, parents of the schoolboys were invited to a session. A discussion and interaction with the resource person ensued. During this event, very strong parental opposition to any change in teaching methods emerged. It was more than obvious that the parents were opposed to any kinds of changes in the traditional classroom methods, an amalgam of structural and lecture-based approaches. They wanted the teacher to lecture at least eighty percent of the time. Task-based teaching met with complete rejection and stiff opposition, even as an idea. Worksheets were given a skeptic's welcome. The fact also came to light that this particular school was the only one that invited parents to be a part of the process of change. In other schools, teaching methodology had been changed overnight without any notice given to parents. Interaction with parents afterwards revealed that parental approval is indispensable if any change is to be made in teaching methodology. If this approval is not granted, young learners cannot benefit from new methods because they are not encouraged to discuss classroom interactive tasks at

home, which gives them the idea that interactive tasks are not 'real education'.

FINDINGS

The learner in this part of North India is already at a disadvantage due to being part of a bilingual and, at times, trilingual² society. If the learner has the advantage of being able to understand two or three languages, s/he also faces the distinct disadvantage of living in an environment where English is not a language for everyday communication. Using English outside the classroom is essential in order to develop fluency in the language skills, but the environment, coupled with parental disapproval, may make the learner feel inhibited and out of place while doing so. In India, parental intervention still remains a part of the education structure in schools. Education is still assessed in terms of marks and positions. In this scenario, tasks and interactive teaching seem to be a waste of time to most parents. This results in a situation where parents cannot perceive how fluency can be transcribed into good marks in the examination. Therefore, whenever some activities require inputs beyond the classroom or are not connected with the prescribed textbooks, they are frowned upon. This problem can be remedied if parents are taken into confidence in advance and schools take the trouble to explain in detail the rationale behind task-based, interactive teaching.

In the area of teacher training, some distinct shortcomings emerged. As mentioned earlier, the virtual bombardment of workshops, seminars and orientation programmes gave a rosy tinge to the whole picture. It seemed as if, overnight, teachers and classrooms had undergone a sea-size change. The actual situation was somewhat different. One, for years these teachers had relied upon the lecture method and their teaching had been examination-oriented for achievement type testing. The need of the hour was a systematic training programme spread over weeks, with practical demonstration lessons and lesson plans to show the efficacy of the new methodology. Instead, teachers were pelted with information and training without being given the time to judge for themselves the rationale behind this changeover. The school administration in every school invited resource persons without formulating a clear-cut plan for the teacher training. The result was that one week was devoted to learner-centered teaching, another to evaluation strategies, yet another to tasks and the teacher became a sort of jack-of-all-trades, master of none. These teachers had been in the profession for a good twenty years or so, and had not kept in touch with the winds of change in ELT. Two, teacher training, in order to be effective, has to be an ongoing process. The concept of 'preset' and 'inset' teacher training is still foreign to India. Once the resource persons had left, there was no one to coordinate the teaching programme and the only guidance came from libraries stocked at random. Three, in theory, reams of paper bore witness to teachers being trained in ELT material generation, but, in practice, they felt at sea when faced with the

¹ North Indian society uses both Punjabi and Hindi in social interaction. Day by day, English is becoming a part of everyday conversation, but only in exclusive areas like banking or education. By and large, Hindi and Punjabi remain the mother tongue and it is not surprising to find smatterings of Urdu in families who have parents or grandparents who lived in Pakistan before the partition (1947).

task. Left to fend for themselves, they turned to their old methods or restricted themselves to the limited range of tasks provided by the textbooks.

Since the teachers were a confused and overburdened lot in the absence of well-directed training, they could not drum up enough enthusiasm in the learners for the changed methodology. Students for years had divided their classroom materials into two groups required for examination and not required for examination. Unfortunately, in the absence of parental encouragement and proper teacher guidance, they catalogued communicative tasks and interactive activities under the heading "not required for examination". These were performed for the satisfaction of the teacher and were looked upon as purposeless, entertaining, less educational and conveniently relegated to the back burner.

In spite of so many changes in other areas, curriculum development still remains an ivory-tower exercise in schools. There is a communication gap between those who teach and those who frame the syllabus, those who implement it and those who evaluate. The teacher has no autonomy. The syllabus-framer is one person, the policy-maker another, while the paper setter and the examiner still others. Even when the examination is not one conducted by a high school board, all schools follow this hierarchical system. Over a span of time, it is possible to train teachers in a different teaching methodology, but to make mindset changes in a complete hierarchy is a next to impossible task. And unless the whole system is ready to accept and adopt changes,

the learner cannot be blamed for being suspicious of new classroom techniques.

The level of implementation of new methodology is an important factor, too. Some schools introduced task-based, interactive teaching for six-year-old learners, some for ten and some for thirteen. Post-evaluation results were most encouraging with very young learners. The relationship is one of inverse proportion: the younger the learner, the greater the success achieved through teaching in the interactive, task-based mode. To quote Rivers (1998: 13), "Collaborative activity of this type should be the norm from the beginning of language study" (Rivers, 1998). Once the learner gets used to the audio-lingual, structural, lecture method approach, weaning is difficult and learners take quite a long time to get used to a changed classroom environment in which the teacher is the facilitator and not the boss of the whole show. Young and unconditioned minds are best for innovations.

CONCLUSION

This study has helped me, as a teacher, to understand the tendencies shown by my students in the classroom. When some schoolteachers learnt about this research, they expressed their interest in classroom observation as a tool for applying diagnostic strategies. Later on, this can lead to remedial teaching, too. The relationship among the student, teacher and research has been emphasized often enough. Teachers and students can be co-researchers in the process. Indeed, they are the ultimate beneficiaries in any research.

When it is an established fact that every classroom is unique and, as such, has unique demands, no methodology or pedagogy can be thrust lock, stock and barrel upon a set of learners. Surely, one cannot simply lift a model for language teaching and impose it upon a classroom without trying to understand the environment in which the model would be expected to take root. If changes are imposed without due thought and planning, the result is 'a goodly apple rotten to the core'. In the newspapers and journals, the adoption of a communicative, task-based, interactive methodologies look and sound very good. But without the requisite optimal conditions to support them, constant research to modify them and increase their efficacy, it can lead to confused teachers and learners, giving rise to disappointing outputs.

GLOSSARY

1. Blitzkrieg: an intense series of inputs.
2. Chalk-Talk routines: the method of teaching with the teacher's lecture at the centre, that perceives teachers as givers of a package called education; learners are purely at the receiving end with no expectation or opportunity of interaction.
3. Communicative language teaching: method of teaching that aims to develop communicative competence, as opposed to simple knowledge of grammatical and similar structures.
4. Fluency level: measure of the ability to express oneself accurately and articulately in a language.
5. Interactive teaching: method of teaching that treats language as a tool for the creation and maintenance of

interpersonal relationships and social transactions.

6. Learner-centred teaching: learners are not treated as passive participants at the receiving end; they are a part of the whole classroom experience and contribute actively to it through tasks and activities.

7. Lecture-based: the antithesis of learner-centred teaching; learners are totally passive listeners.

8. Pedagogy: the method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept.

9. Preset and inset teacher training: training of this kind is the norm in the West, where English is the mother tongue. Preset refers to pre-service training and inset refers to in-service training for teachers.

10. Structural: the approach or method that views language as a system of structurally related elements for the encoding of meaning; in which the system of speech is primary.

11. Task-based teaching: based on the communicative approach, it uses tasks and activities as the core units of planning and instruction in language teaching.

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